

The Hands of the Blacks by Luis Bernardo Honwana

I don't remember now how we got on to the subject, but one day, Teacher said that the palms of the Blacks' hands were much lighter than the rest of their bodies. This is because only a few centuries ago, they walked around with them like wild animals, so their palms weren't exposed to the sun, which made the rest of their bodies darker. I thought of this when Father Christiano told us after catechism that we were absolutely hopeless, and that even the pygmies were better than us, and he went back to this thing about their hands being lighter, and said it was like that because they always went about with their hands folded together, praying in secret. I thought this was so funny, this thing of the Blacks' hands being lighter, that you should just see me now. I do not let go of anyone, whoever they are, until they tell me why they think that the palms of the Blacks' hands are lighter. Doña Dores, for instance, told me that God made Blacks' hands lighter so they would not dirty the food they made for their masters, or anything else they were ordered to do that had to be kept clean.

Señor Antunes, the Coca-Cola man, who only comes to the village now and again when all the Cokes in the *cantinas* have been sold, said it was a lot of baloney. Of course, I do not know if it was really such, but he assured me, it was. After that I said, "All right, it was baloney," and then he told me what he knew about this thing of the Blacks' hands. It was like this: "Long ago, many years ago, God the Father, Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, St. Peter, many other saints, all the angels that were in Heaven, and some of the people who had died and gone to Heaven—they all had a meeting and decided to create the Blacks. Do you know how? They got hold of some clay and pressed it into some second-hand molds and baked the clay of creatures, which they took from the heavenly kilns. Because they were in a hurry and there was no room next to the fire, they hung them in the chimneys. Smoke, smoke, smoke—and there you have them, black as coals. And now, do you want to know why their hands stayed white? Well, didn't they have to hold on while their clay baked?"

When he told me this, Señor Antunes and the other men who were around us were very pleased and they all burst out laughing. That very same day, Señor Frias told me that everything i had heard from them there had been just one big pack of lies. Really and truly, what he knew about the Blacks' hands was right—that God finished men and told them to bathe in a lake in Heaven. After bathing, the people were nice and white. The Blacks, well. They were made very early in the morning and at this hour, the water in the lake was very cold, so they only wet the palms of their hands and the soles of their feet before dressing and coming to the world.

But i read in a book that happened to mention the story, that the Blacks have hands lighter like this because they spent their lives bent over, gathering the white cotton of Virginia and i dont know where else. Of course, Doña Estefania did not agree when i told her this. According to her, it is only because their hands became bleached with all that washing.

Well, i do not know what to think about all this but the truth is that however calloused and cracked they may be, Black hands are always lighter than the rest of him. And that's that!

My mother is the only one who must be right about this question of a Black's hands being lighter than the rest of his body. On the day that we were talking about it, i was telling her what i already knew about the question, and she could not stop laughing. When i was talking, she did not tell me at once what she thought about all this and she only talked when she was sure that i wouldn't get tired of bothering her about it. And even then, she was crying and clutching herself around the stomach like someone who had laughed so much that it was quite unbearable. What she said was more or less this:

"God made Blacks because they had to be. They had to be, my son. He thought they really had to be. Afterwards, He regretted having made them because other men laughed at them and took away their homes and put them to serve as slaves and not much better. But because He couldn't make them all white, for those who were used to seeing them black would complain, He made it so that the palms of their hands would be exactly like the palms of the hands of other men. And do you know why that was? Well, listen: it was to show that what men do is only the work of men... that what men do is done by hands that are the same—hands of people. How, if they had any sense, would know that before anything else they are men. He must have been thinking of this when He made the hands of those men who thank God they are not black!"

After telling me all this, my mother kissed my hands. As i ran off to the yard to play ball, i thought that i had never seen a person cry so much as my mother did then.